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CHARITABLE RELIEF

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TO all thoughtful persons the term "charitable relief" signifies more than assistance in the form of monetary aid. It comprehends also the great variety of services, material and other, which are bestowed upon needy persons by individuals and by the rapidly increasing number of agencies now doing practical, personal work in the homes of the poor.

The next step to be taken in the administration of charitable relief, as thus defined, is in the direction of securing unity and efficiency in such social service. This conclusion becomes obvious upon a study of the present situation and the prevailing tendencies in charitable endeavor.

There are more than a thousand private institutions and societies in New York city offering charitable relief to the poor. During the past five years there has been a remarkable extension and diversification of the help available for the destitute and suffering, especially in the sphere of public medical service. About twenty social-service departments of hospitals and dispensaries have been established. It is their purpose to put physicians in touch with home conditions, to relate patients to other agencies whose services may be needed, and to enable discharged patients to re-establish themselves permanently in the industrial world without the extraordinary strain which too often occurs.

There is now complete sanitary supervision of tuberculosis. Hundreds of nurses are visiting the homes of those patients who do not employ private physicians. These nurses do not, and cannot, ignore factors affecting the health and welfare of other members of such families as well as of the patients themselves.

There are hundreds of visiting school nurses. Each one realizes that the child's physical defect, which it is her business to have corrected, is frequently a symptom of unfavorable home

conditions. These may require not only her attention but the services of one or of several special agencies to assure the continuing health of the child.

The teacher nurses and milk-station nurses, who in growing numbers are rendering increasingly valuable services in the homes of the poor, cannot succeed in their work as they wish to do without full knowledge of the needs and resources of each of the families with which they deal.

There is certain to be a further extension of social service in connection with medical relief. This is but another way of saying that there is certain to be a wider and deeper appreciation of the necessity of considering and treating the needs of the whole family, even when the illness of one member seems to require special attention.

This reference to the development taking place in the work of medical agencies is but an illustration of the growing consciousness, spreading widely throughout the community, that the real relief of need, in most instances, means the treatment of a family problem. The whole family must be considered with respect to the conditions, needs and possibilities of each of its members. The treatment of the whole problem thus presented must be continued until self-dependence becomes possible and assured, or until some form of continuing assistance is provided. Otherwise results worth while will not be attained.

In striving to attain such results, which are the only results worthy the ideals of present-day charitable relief, the agencies concerned are delving deeper into the essential facts of their cases, making broader plans, holding more persistently to their purposes, keeping more useful records and developing a more coöperative spirit. They are drawing closer together in their work with particular families. They are uniting to attack, in accord with a common plan, the problems there presented.

It is generally conceded that this working together is mutually helpful and that it makes for efficiency and economy. That it occurs too infrequently is due largely to the fact that there is no common, ready and certain means of information as to all that is being done for any particular family.

It seems clear, therefore, that the next step to be taken in

the organization of charitable relief in this city is to find the means and the method by which such information may be made quickly available upon inquiry—or even without inquiry. It is entirely practicable, by a simple device, to enable each of the various agencies whose work may at any time be focused upon the same family to share in the knowledge, experience and plans of the others. The instrument which may be employed for this purpose is the Confidential Exchange of Information, for which there is now in this city a most pressing need.

The Confidential Exchange of Information will become a central bureau of registration of the names and addresses of all the families under care of those agencies which make use of it. For each of these families there will be a card on which will be written also the names of all the agencies who are, or have been in touch with the family and who have records or available knowledge concerning it. No other information will be recorded save that which is necessary to assure identification—as, for instance, the names and ages of children, and the ages and occupations of other members of the family.

It is perhaps desirable to emphasize the confidential character of such an exchange of information. The number of names registered in New York city would in a short time become very large. A consolidation of the present registration bureaus of the Charity Organization Society, the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor and the United Hebrew Charities would afford an initial registration of nearly three hundred thousand names. Any one name would be absolutely lost in such a vast number and would come to the attention only of those interested persons who might make inquiry concerning the family. Although personal interests and feelings would thus be carefully protected, the mass of registration itself would afford many social data of value in determining the character, prevalence and causes of need, and in planning further preventive and constructive effort. The extent to which studies for such purposes could be carried would be limited only by the time and money available to keep the necessary records. The exchange would thus become the means of a general public service. Its immediate purpose, however, and its greatest value

would be in the every-day work of the administration of charitable relief.

Any society or interested individual about to investigate the needs of a family or to give assistance should first of all make inquiry of the Confidential Exchange either by letter or by telephone, preferably the latter. Instantly the names of all other agencies already acquainted with the family would become known. The exchange would, in turn, at once notify each of these agencies of the new inquiry. Its responsibility would then end, and it would lie with the agencies concerned to confer, to share their information and their plans, and to make such new plans as the occasion might require.

The Confidential Exchange, as thus conducted, will safeguard the privacy of the families whose names are registered, by avoiding duplication of investigation. A family under the continuing and sufficient care of one organization will be protected against the undesirable and unintentional invasion of its home by another society. In instances where coöperation is desirable the use of the exchange will afford opportunity for effective team work by the various agencies whose services are required.

There need be no unconscious interference by one society or individual with the success of plans carefully made and worked out by someone else, as now frequently occurs. The families themselves may be saved from the confusion and distraction of the conflicting plans of agencies not in coöperation. The various agencies in the community will surely profit by a saving of time, effort and money, by interchange of experiences and by closer relationships.

The essential purpose and most valuable service of the Confidential Exchange, however, will be in promoting coöperation and in stimulating thereby the development of thorough-going case treatment. Concerted and effective action, as early in the history of the family's need as possible, will result in rehabilitation of family life in a larger proportion of cases. This is the basis of our hope for the reduction of the number of persons in poverty, and for the development of preventive measures to eradicate many of the causes which now bring the poor into distress.